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U. S. Department of Agriculture

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Thursday, January 31, 1935.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "Happy Home Life for House Plants." Information from the Bureau of Plant Industry, U.S.D.A.

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From what W.R.B., our garden adviser tells me, caring for house-plants is a good deal like caring for a baby. He says that if plants that grow indoors are to be strong and healthy, you have to give them the right food; plenty of sunshine; the right amount of water to drink; frequent baths -- yes, you have to bathe the leaves with soap and water; and especially the right home atmosphere. Finally, you need to be on your guard against plant ills and know how to treat them when they occur.

Many plants that come into homes in the best condition for hardy growth shrivel and die from the dry hot indoor air. The atmosphere of most of our homes in winter is of desert dryness compared to the moisture-laden air of a green-house. If you keep pans of water on your radiators or keep the water tank in your hot-air furnace filled, this will add some moisture to the air. Then, cooking in the kitchen also gives off considerable steam. But even so, the air of the average house is usually far from ideal for plant-growing. We human beings usually feel most comfortable when the thermometer is registering around <sup>what</sup> seventy. Well, that happens to be fifteen to twenty degrees higher than <sup>most</sup> plants have in green-houses, especially at night. And while people often don't notice gas fumes from stoves or leaky heaters, these may be fatal to plants.

Well, there's the first requirement for health of plants -- moist, cool, fresh air. But not too cool. Never expose your indoor growing things to draughts of cold air. If your plants are growing in a window -- as they probably will be, remember to protect them from chill on very cold winter nights. Put curtains or papers between the plants and the glass. W.R.B says several thicknesses of newspaper can do wonders in protecting plants from Jack Frost's unkind fingers on winter nights.

So much for atmosphere. Now a word about watering your plants. Probably nothing affects the growth and well-being of plants so much as regular and careful watering. No matter how perfectly you regulate the temperature and other conditions, your plants won't be healthy unless you water them properly. Plants can die of from too much watering just as they can die of thirst. Be sure that the soil around the roots never becomes so dry that the leaves droop, but, on the other hand, don't drown the roots. Most people who are "lucky" with house plants give each one a little sprinkling each day. By watching the soil, you can soon determine the amount to apply. Keep soil evenly damp. Some plants drink more than others. For example, ferns and begonias and geraniums need considerably more water than palms, crotons, dracenas, and all of the so-called succulents. Cactus plants, as you might imagine, take very little water.





Often, a light watering once a week is all they need. Now here's a word of caution about your palms and ferns -- those whose pots you have standing in jardiniers. Unless you water with great care, these plants are likely to become waterlogged. For, you see, the jardiniere will hold any water which drains through the bottom of the pot.

And speaking of food for your plants, we should mention the soil they live on. When the florist speaks of "potting soil," he usually means a mixture of rotted turf or sod, rotted dairy-barn compost, and a little sharp sand. But practically every plant needs a different variation of this formula. For example, your fern will want more humus or organic matter than your geranium. Begonias also want plenty of humus, while palms and the slower growing plants will prefer a fairly heavy soil. As for the cactus or any other desert plant, it will grow in almost pure sand with just enough loam mixed with the sand to prevent too rapid drying out.

A good soil mixture for general use with house plants, W.R.B., says, is two parts of good garden loam, and one part of old dairy-barn compost. If the loam happens to be of clay, better add a little sand, and also a slight sprinkling of bone-meal or other good fertilizer. In all cases, remember to mix the soil well and take out stones or lumps.

Some plants die because the soil isn't packed firmly and closely around the roots when they are put in pots. Air spaces around the roots are fatal. Moreover, soil that isn't packed down firmly won't hold the plant in position and will let the water run straight through.

Well, so far we've mentioned the right atmosphere for good health of plants, the right soil to nourish them, and the right amount of water for them to drink.

Now about sunshine. Plants can't thrive without sunshine anymore than babies can. But it's hard to give indoor plants the sunshine they need for good health. The best you can do is to keep them in a south window and give them the benefit of the rays that come slanting through the pane. Outdoors or in greenhouses, the plants get full sunshine for at least six or seven hours a day, you know -- that is, on bright days. But even on cloudy days plants outdoors get much more diffused light than they can possibly have in the house.

The dust and soot which gathers on leaves of plants indoors is a handicap to their growth. So W. R. B., says the leaves need a cool soap-and-water bath every now and then, and then a rinse in cool, clean water. He says plants will stand a good deal of soap -- both foliage and stems, with benefit, if you're careful not to let any soapy water drain into the soil. He suggests bathing your plant this way. Lay the plant on its side, make a cool suds of mild soap, sponge off each leaf with a piece of absorbent cotton dipped in the suds, then rinse each leaf with cool clean water.

Houseplants, fortunately, don't suffer from measles or whooping cough. But they have their own ills in the form of plant lice, mealy bugs, red spider or scale insects. So examine each plant frequently so that such afflictions don't get a head start before you begin treatment. Fortunately, the remedy for most of them is simple. The soap-and-water bath for leaves and stems is the best cure. And a teaspoon of nicotine sulphate added to each gallon of soapy water will help destroy the insects.

